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PRETORIA FOR RSO, ESC AND HQ, MCESG REGION 6

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SUBJECT: CRIME IN LUANDA: FROM BAD TO WORSE

¶1. Summary: Brazen and violent crimes targeting Westerners have shaken Luanda's international community. Perpetually gridlocked streets make the targets easy pickings for gangs of robbers who have ratcheted up their aggressiveness in attacking vulnerable individuals stuck in traffic. Angolan police are locked in a reactive mentality that leaves the initiative to the criminals, who take full advantage of the opportunities. Increasingly, violent crime is occurring near the Embassy and residential areas where Embassy staff lives, including one fusillade audible in the Ambassador's office. In light of the increasing volume and proximity of violent crime in Luanda, Post urges DS to validate a "CRITICAL" crime threat rating for Luanda. End summary.

¶2. Luanda is a city designed in colonial times to house about a half-million inhabitants, but now more than ten times that number reside here. Such overcrowding enables criminal gangs to roam freely both in daytime and at night, moving with ease from slum shantytowns (that seem to fill every available piece of ground) to commit street and property crimes in more affluent neighborhoods located nearby.

Embassy Neighborhood: A Critical Crime Area

¶3. Three incidents within walking distance of the Embassy on one single day - December 4 - make clear that the dangers to the Mission are real. On that day a Portuguese diplomat was assaulted while driving his CD-plated personal vehicle along the Serpentine, a notoriously crime-infested road located immediately in front of the Embassy. This road, which also connects to some of the city's worst slums, is the primary access street to the central business district from the Miramar neighborhood - a relatively upscale area that is home to the U.S. Embassy, the EMR and DCR, plus fifteen other staff residences. While gridlocked in traffic, the diplomat's car was surrounded by four to five youths, who demanded he roll down his window or they would shoot. (One of them had his hand in his pocket as if he was concealing a sidearm.) The diplomat complied with their demands and gave up his cell phone, but told them he had no cash. They became more insistent and agitated, until, at a signal from one of the youths (evidently a lookout), they suddenly dispersed.

¶4. On the same day and along the same road, a U.K. national and former policeman, now employed by a multinational firm, was driving to work in the morning and was stuck in gridlocked traffic. In front of his car, an SUV was being driven by an Angolan woman. A youth walked up to the rear passenger door and spotted the woman's purse on the back seat. He broke the small window in the door, unlocked it, and tried to snatch the purse. He pulled out a knife and struggled with the woman to take the purse. Frustrated, he reached in front and opened the front passenger door. He then entered through the front door with the knife and the woman gave her bag to the assailant. He started to walk away with the purse when the driver of another car, who had observed the incident, exited his vehicle to confront the robber. The thief pointed the knife at the driver, who then pulled out a sidearm from underneath the floor mat in his vehicle and shot at the thief as he jumped over the side of the road, down the hill and into the trees. It is not known if the thief was hit by the gunshot, but he did get away. After the shot was fired, the man returned to his car, placed the firearm back under the floor mat, calmly got back behind the wheel of his vehicle and continued on his way.

15. Finally, on the morning of the same day, post's surveillance detection team observed two Angolan men on a motor scooter who (according to a witness) were in pursuit of an Angolan woman reputed to be carrying a sum of cash on her person. The robbers caught up with their quarry in front of the large municipal cemetery located to the immediate south of the U.S. Embassy compound. At that moment, an undercover police unit was deployed on the scene and fired its weapons at the robbers. The robbers were not struck by any of the police gunfire and managed to make a clean getaway. Not so fortunate, however, were three other vehicles hit and damaged in the crossfire, as was a municipal employee - a street sweeper shot in the leg by a police bullet. He was evacuated to the hospital. This incident illustrates that, despite recent efforts made to improve professionalism, training, ethics, and responsiveness, the police services have not yet embraced "community policing" methods of law enforcement. Indeed, at least some of the tactical training provided in country to rank-and-file police personnel (reportedly by Israeli instructors on contract) may have served to increase the threat to innocent bystanders.

The Criminals: Bold, Well-Armed, and Mobile

16. Angolans, themselves, express shock and dismay at the aggressiveness of criminals in Luanda, who are becoming bolder and less deterred by risk of confrontation when committing street and property crimes. A frightening example of this occurred on October 13, when a 47-year old Angolan driver employed by a USAID contractor organization was shot while picking up an Angolan staff colleague who was scheduled to fly from Luanda to Huambo. The driver reached the staffer's home in the Kilamba Kiaxi area in time to pick her up and take her to the airport for check-in at 04:00 Hrs. The driver sounded the horn outside the house, and the staffer emerged and asked him to come inside as she needed more time to finish packing for the trip. As the driver locked the doors of the vehicle, he was surprised by a lone man pointing a Kalashnikov rifle at him from behind. When the driver turned to see who it was and ask what he wanted, the gunman fired the weapon, striking the driver just below the armpit and sending him into shock. After a few minutes, he revived and was able to bang on the front door of the staffer, who had heard the gunshot and locked the doors to protect her family in the house. Fearing the gunman was still outside, she did not open the door until her neighbors, responding to the commotion, came to the driver's aid. By this time, the gunman had already fled, and the driver was helped into his vehicle by the neighbors and the staffer, who drove him to the hospital where his condition was stabilized.

17. Despite government amnesties and incentives to encourage the population to surrender unregistered weapons, criminals have little difficulty obtaining military grade firepower and still less hesitation about using it. On 26 November, a male expatriate staffer was driving an NGO-owned vehicle back to the organization's offices in Luanda with four NGO staff passengers (including one female AmCIT). While moving through part of the city outskirts called Kilometer-Nine, the NGO vehicle was overtaken by a Toyota RAV4 that stopped directly in front of them, blocking the way. Five gunmen exited the RAV4, all armed with sidearms and/or automatic rifles. They ordered the NGO staff out of the vehicle at gunpoint, took their valuables and belongings, and then seized the NGO vehicle. The carjackers drove off with the stolen vehicle, leaving the victims badly shaken and stranded but unhurt. Estimated depreciated value of the property stolen was over 17,000 dollars, including one NGO owned (and marked) Toyota Hilux 4WD vehicle, several cellphones, a laptop computer, and various cash, documents, and belongings, including a valid U.S. passport. Police were notified but, to date, no property has been recovered nor have any known useful leads been developed.

18. Criminals usually operate in groups of two to four individuals; increasingly, they are confrontational and sometimes gratuitously violent. On November 22, an FSN employee of the U.S. Embassy had just finished working the 08:00 to 15:00 shift as Duty Driver. While on his way home in a van-taxi (the most common form of public transport in Luanda), he stopped to change to another van-taxi in the vicinity of Roque Santeiro, a crime-ridden open-air market. Suddenly, he was surprised by six unknown men, one of whom pointed a sidearm at him while his accomplices searched the employee's pockets and robbed him of two cellphones (one of which was Embassy property)

as well as approximately USD 40.00 in local currency. Like many Angolans in similar circumstances, the employee reported the crime to his employer (the U.S. Embassy), but avoided making any kind of report to the local police, believing such an effort to be, at best, a waste of time.

Police: Hidebound, Flat-Footed, and Ineffective

¶9. Although authorities have made efforts to put more police on the streets with improved salaries and equipment, they are still locked in a reactive posture and bureaucratic mindset that leaves the initiative with the criminals. As a result, police are ineffective in deterring or disrupting crimes and are seldom able to apprehend suspects. On 19 November, a Portuguese national businessman had just collected a large amount of money from a bank in the downtown central business district (less than 2km from the U.S. Embassy). As he got into his vehicle to depart, he was surprised by an armed man banging on the window, while the getaway driver on a motor scooter drove up and also pointed a sidearm at his window. The victim resisted and two shots were fired, one of which struck his leg and second that grazed his scalp. The victim's Angolan driver threw out the bag containing the money that the victim had just drawn from the bank (reportedly USD 13,000), and the robbers picked it up and sped away from the scene on the scooter. Most noteworthy is that this incident occurred near Kinaxixi circle, one of the areas with the city's heaviest police presence. However, Angolan police persist in favoring static uniformed posts that are all but useless in countering the robbers' typical and usually successful tactics of using motor scooters to maximize their speed, surprise, and mobility.

¶10. COMMENT: The incident described in para 5 above was close enough to the U.S. Embassy compound that both Ambassador and DCM heard the gunfire in their offices. That such a fusillade can take place in an area that literally dozens of embassy employees and families must pass through on a daily basis is testimony of the prevalence of both firearms and crime in the city. Angolans and expats alike confront this crime and it shows no sign of abating. Earlier this year DS made a determination to lower Luanda's crime threat rating from 'Critical' to 'High'. RSO has made a concerted effort to improve the quality and timeliness of incident reporting and hopes that it validates the finding (shared by the post EAC) that a 'Critical' crime threat is the only appropriate rating for Luanda. END COMMENT.

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